This is a rewrite of Jake Saliger's blogposting *Uncomfortable Truth: How Close is 'Positivity Culture' to Delusion and Denial?* While many celebrate appropriation as *Kulturideal,* yet it's not done to actually alter texts of others. It's considered plagiarism – and we have machines for that. However, what happens you do this out in the open and attribute (and praise!) the original author? In this case, I have taken the freedom to summarize, condense and transpose Saliger's cancer-related essay into the social media context. Transposing is a known cultural technique in music (read here how you can transpose from piano to violine). We swap context while keeping all the core ideas intact. The original text can be found here. Jake Saliger is an American writer and cancer patient who's in a terminal stage of the decease. You can read him here, reporting about his latest medical condition. Jake Saliger passed away early August 2024.

The real question is to design pain and grief. While doom scrolling may lead to a lot of views, negativity still doesn't sell. Deep down, the entire social media interface culture is still based on 'positive' one-dimensional values such as 'friends' and 'likes' – without offering any alternatives. Setbacks, doubts and conflicts do fit into the social media marketing schemes at all. The rise of right-wing libertarian over the past decade can be credited to this gigantic machine now called platform capitalism that deliberately filtered out anything not positive. And was then surprised to see that this massive repression of the negative returned – and backfired on the so-called 'good people' and their 'positive intentions'.

Here we go. Jack Saliger:

Positivity culture is rooted in the desire to evade the discomfort of imminent mortality or seek false control because true control is out of reach. It can come from friends, family, strangers, and strangers on the Internet who say look at the bright side or other people have it worse or you are lucky in some ways. It's the people who say I should stifle or cut off negativity.

Positivity culture is adjacent to therapy culture, which I'm also ambivalent about: therapy is useful to some people in some circumstances, but for many it's become a crutch and, often, a form of narcissistic dysfunction that denies true obligation to other people, as therapy itself becomes a replacement for authentic relationships and family. Real friendships and relationships aren't about what happens when things are happy and convenient; they're about what happens during difficulty, strife, and inconvenience. Who are you when things get hard?

There is a search for meaning during the inevitable tragedies of human existence, and is better for us than avoiding darkness and trying to 'stay positive.'" "Tragic optimism" seems to me close to a stoic attitude, which admits sadness into life without being dominated by sadness. Look, I like optimism. Being around optimists is often more fun than being around dour pessimists. I just don't want optimism to bleed into folly or inanity. The lines are blurry.

Gratitude is good. Having some perspective is good, even though I'm not sure what "having perspective" means. From a sufficiently cosmic perspective, our lives can look kind of pointless and meaningless, which seems bad, and maybe it's better to imbue life with a meaning that doesn't intrinsically exist. Maybe the optimal amount of perspective is as tricky a line as the right amount and kind of positivity.

I recently read "The Optimists Ended up in Auschwitz." As you can infer from the title, the people who looked on the bright side didn't flee Germany in the 1930s, and the people who were less convinced of the goodness of the mob ran, survived, and passed on their genes. Optimism is often but not always warranted, and pessimism exists because bad things do in fact happen, and, if we ignore them, we can die.

When someone pitches positivity to me, I know there's a kind of self-interest lurking in the pitch.[2] Most of us prefer to hang out with someone who's upbeat to someone who is dour. Yet negative people are often funnier—better able to see life's absurdities, which is to say human absurdity. I've gotten a lot of positive feedback on the humor in my cancer writing, and that humor germinates, I think, in my cantankerous side.

In the U.S., we're bad at dealing with things that just suck. Pain and adversity often teach nothing except how to access the angry, petty aspects of our natures. A friend recommended *It's OK That You're Not OK: Meeting Grief and Loss in a Culture That Doesn't Understand* by Megan Devine; the book is useful, though it should really be a 5,000- or 10,000-word article.[4] It starts: "The way we deal with grief in our culture is broken." How so? Devine says: "Platitudes and advice, even when said with good intentions, came across as dismissive, reducing such great pain to greeting card one-liners." The intentions are good, but they misfire because "Our culture sees grief as a kind of malady: a terrifying, messy emotion that needs to be cleaned up and put behind us as soon as possible."

Devine says grief is deeply felt, and often continues to be felt for longer than it "should be" (however long that is), and often the best thing for friends and family to do is nothing but sit and be present. I guess they can stand and be present, too. Most of us are uncomfortable and impatient with grief, so the advice to buck up, move past it, stay positive, etc., is really about making the person speaking feel better—not the griever. According to Devine, "Even our clinicians are trained to see grief as a disorder rather than a natural response to deep loss." The commonplaces people say are detrimental, not helpful, in Devine's model: "Platitudes and cheerleading solve nothing. In fact, this kind of support only makes you feel like no one in the world understands." Is it true support? When friends and family inadvertently reach for clichés, the effect is the opposite.

Sometimes things happen for no discernible reason. Sometimes things happen and there is nothing to be learned from them. I for one think I've learned nothing from having cancer or losing my tongue, apart from the obvious, like "both suck." Neither has made me stronger, better, more empathetic, or anything else positive. I'm not a better person. I don't appreciate life more. People have told me my writing about my experience is helping other people, which *is* good, but writing about my illness has taught me that I'd prefer to be writing about something else in order to help people. It's all bad, no good. I'd prefer not to have whatever wisdom pain might impart. Devine says: "As a culture, we don't want to hear that there are things that can't be fixed. As a culture, we don't want to hear that there is some pain that never gets redeemed." Instead, we want people to be positive and look on the bright side, even when both are lies.

Devine says that "Talking with people in new grief is tricky. During the first year, it's so tempting to say that things get better." There's sometimes some truth to this: things are better for me right, now, today, than they were in June to August 2023. But they're forever going to be worse than they were before cancer. To claim otherwise is not to put a positive spin on things; it's to be willfully delusional. Positivity easily shades into delusion. "There are some events that happen in life that cause people to cross a threshold that forever changes them, whether they seek out their transformation or not." I like that Devine is willing to imply that transformation can be bad. Sometimes there isn't compensation for suffering. Sometimes suffering is, tautologically, just suffering. Not everything is meaningful and trying to impose meaning on it—or trying to impose meaning on it for the person experiencing it, so that you can feel that, should the same happen to you, it

would be meaningful and not just arbitrary and terrifying—can backfire.

Being sad or unhappy or similar is telling us something. Sometimes it's telling us to change. Sometimes it's telling us something else, I think. Sometimes the feeling is just wrong, as is our potentially myopic interpretation of a situation, and, when a feeling is wrong, that's when positivity culture may help. But negativity isn't always wrong or pathological, and improvements come from realizing something is not going right and then fixing it. Or recognizing that something can't be fixed, and the time is now to sit with the unhappiness.

I'm not against positivity and, like most people, I'd prefer most of the time to be around positive people than negative ones. But I also prefer to be around truthful, accurate people more than the delusionally optimistic, and though I can't firmly mark the line between them, I know it when I see it. I appreciate what the friends who tell me to excise the negative are saying, even when I don't follow their suggestions. Sliding into darkness and then the void is easy. Many aspects of my life do in fact suck, particularly compared to my life before the cancer diagnosis. Perhaps paradoxically, part of what's allowed me to keep going is to acknowledge and be honest about what is going wrong, while trying to focus on the things that remain that are going right: mostly my relationships with other people, Bess, and still being able to write and contribute. Seeing that there are things to live for doesn't negate or cushion the blows from the things that make living awful and hard, but neither do the things that have made me consider auto-termination negate the things that are still good.

The worst parts of the positivity people are the ones who reject sickness, setback, and ailment altogether—the "fair-weather friends" of cliché. The people who are "friends" with you, but when something slightly inconvenient comes along, they don't want to hear about it—they're obviously not friends, not in any significant sense of the word.

Sitting with someone who is ill, talking about it frankly, and the new challenges and fears it creates, puts the sitter in a position of closeness with the ill person, and therefore closeness with that person's illness or loss. "If it's happening to this guy, it could happen to me," those clinging to the security blanket of positivity culture seem to be thinking. But, even for those who aren't made uncomfortable by the thought of their own fragility, listening to someone's personal experience with illness establishes a kind and depth of intimacy most people just aren't really interested in. We're a

culture of surface, not depth. We more frequently say, "Hey, how're you doing?" to people while we're actively in transit, unable and [unwilling to stop and hear a real answer](#).

Positivity culture is often a canned response to deflect and discourage real conversation. It's a cutoff in the guise of the curative powers of pretend. It's faux-connection. It's bullshit. And our conversations are already infused with too much bullshit. I've already [imposed a moratorium on banalities](#). Bullshit might be considered banalities' equally useless relational first cousin.

Everything is not fine, not all the time. Not for me. Not for you. Though the gradations of "not fine" vary, shutting our eyes against the inevitable instead of finding a way to weave it into our lives, use it to forge connections with other equally fragile human beings, and use that knowledge to generate connection, is shutting our eyes against our own humanity. Sometimes a seemingly sunnier, happier perspective is an alienating, temporarily comforting lie.

The Buddhists have a meditation on death called "Maranasati." You lie there for a while and dwell on the fact that, barring technological innovation like the Singularity, you're going to bite it one day. You stop deluding yourself that you're not a part of the human condition. Like many worthwhile things, Maranasati isn't meant to be comfortable, even if you pay $30 to be led through the meditation in a fancy downtown LA yoga studio smelling of Frankincense and populated by flexible twenty-somethings who inspire thoughts very different than those of meeting your untimely end. Sometimes embracing the uncomfortable brings a paradoxical comfort, and sometimes embracing what appears to be comfort is just wallowing in bullshit.